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LETTERS

ADDRESSED TO THE

Philosophers and Politicians of France,

ON THE

SUBJECT OF RELIGION.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED,

OBSERVATIONS

RELATING TO THE

CAUSES OF THE GENERAL PREVALENCE OF
INFIDELITY.

By Joseph Priestley, L.L.D. F.R.S. &c. &c.

TANTAMNE REM TAM NEGLIGENTER,
TERENCE.

PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED BY THOMAS DOBSON,

AT THE STONE-HOUSE, N^o 41, SOUTH SECOND-STREET.

M. DCC. XCIY.



P R E F A C E.

P E R C E I V I N G that there was a wish in many persons in this country to see a correct edition of my *Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians in France on the subject of Religion*, I have carefully revised them, and have prefixed to them some *observations on the prevalence of infidelity*, which I wrote on my voyage. As I had not at that time any thought of connecting them with these *Letters*, and indeed had not a copy of the Letters by me, some of the observations introduced into them both will be found to be in substance the same. But I have not thought it necessary to suppress them in either of the pieces; because they are not numerous, and also because they are of such importance that they cannot be too often presented to the mind.

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If the generality of Christians in this country be offended at my zeal in opposing their peculiar tenets, I hope they will thank me for the pains they will see that I have taken in the defence of our *common principles*. And the chief reason why I have been so strenuous in opposing the doctrine of the *trinity*, *vicarious sufferings*, and other opinions maintained by many Christians is, that I consider them as corruptions of the genuine Christian doctrine, and a great hindrance to its reception in the world. Every person, however, must act according to the light in which he himself sees things ; and we need not doubt but that free discussion will lead at length to the right decision of all controversies, both between believers and unbelievers in Christianity, and between the different sects into which Christians are divided. In the mean time, I hope that for the honour of our religion, and of human nature, we shall all be careful to preserve that temper which becomes Christians and enquirers after truth.

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OBSERVATIONS

RELATING TO THE

Causes of the general Prevalence of Infidelity.

TO a person who himself entertains no doubt of the truth of revelation, the present prevalence of infidelity becomes the subject of a serious and interesting inquiry. We naturally think that the evidence which appears satisfactory to us, must appear so to all other persons; men being constituted alike, and consequently receiving the same impressions from the same objects.

This, indeed, is strictly true with respect to the ideas of *number* and *quantity*. For to them all minds are in the same state, and therefore to all persons *three* must ever appear more than *two*, and exactly the half of *six*; and no person acquainted with the definition of terms in geometry can possibly deny that the *three angles of a right angled triangle are equal to two right angles*. But

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with respect to propositions which do not admit of this kind of evidence, which depends upon the *coincidence of ideas*, or shewing that under different names the same things are comprehended, different minds may be very differently pre-disposed, so that the same objects will not make the same impression, nor will the same evidence give the same satisfaction.

On the subject of religion, politics, or any thing else that is equally interesting to us, we daily see that the same arguments are very differently received by different persons. The books of Scripture are equally open to all persons, and all sects of Christians profess to derive their doctrines from them. But how much do they differ from each other? And though all antient documents are equally read by the advocates for the original freedom, or the original despotism, of the English constitution, how different are their conclusions?

How different are the opinions that have been, and still are formed, by the readers of the same histories of the characters of Cicero and Cæsar, of the merit or demerit of Charles I. of England, and of the principles of the American and French revolutions. And, in the middle ages, how differently did men think with respect to the question
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which agitated the whole of christendom concerning the validity of the popes at Rome or at Avignon, when all the facts, on which their judgments were formed, were equally before all the parties.

But, what is more to my purpose, different persons, according to their different circumstances and dispositions, will entertain very different opinions concerning the probability, or improbability, the truth, or the falsehood, of *facts*. Of this we had a remarkable instance in England at the time of the invasion of France by the Duke of Brunswick and the King of Prussia; some persons being confident that they had completely defeated the French, and were on their march to Paris, and others seeing no reason to believe any such thing. And even after the retreat took place, it was a long time before the friends of government would give the least credit to it; and yet both parties had the very same intelligence.

Besides this, there are causes of assent to propositions wholly independent of any proper *evidence* presented to the mind itself; so that we may be led to presume that there *is* sufficient evidence, though we do not ourselves perceive it. We are more especially in danger of being misled by spe-

cious *analogies*, and superficial but fixed *maxims* grounded on such analogies. These will, with many persons, even prevent any attention being given to proper evidence; so that, though it be in itself abundantly satisfactory to the candid and attentive, it is impossible that it should have any effect upon them.

On these accounts, truths of an historical nature are liable to be received very differently by different persons; and there is such a number of circumstances to be attended to in order to form a right judgment, that a small difference in the previous state of mind will have a great effect, as to the impression that the same evidence will make; so that different persons, having different ideas with respect to the previous probability, or improbability, of a fact, and also of the competency of the evidence, may draw even contrary conclusions from the same report; one thinking it to be certainly true, and acting upon that idea, and another regarding it as unquestionably false, and, in his conduct wholly uninfluenced by it.

It may, I think, be said with truth, that the greater part of mankind form their opinions on most subjects, even those of the greatest importance, not on any evidence which themselves have considered,

considered, but, in a great measure, from the opinions of other persons, of whose judgment they have, by one means or other, been led to think very highly. Thus children, confiding in the judgment and affection of their parents, which they think has seldom, if ever, misled them, in general adopt implicitly whatever faith, or practice comes recommended to them by their authority. It is by this means, no doubt, that the children of Jews are almost universally of the Jewish religion, those of Mahometans Mahometans, those of Christians Christians, those of Quakers Quakers, &c. &c. Had they formed their opinions from any evidence present to their own minds, the probability would have been that, in all the cases, a much greater proportion of the children would have been of some religious persuasion different from that of their parents; because it was only one of a great number.

In like manner, if a person have by any means been led to form a high opinion of the sagacity and judgment of other persons, though not his parents or tutors, he will be apt to adopt their opinions, without any examination of his own. And this is evidently the case with the generality of unbelievers, as well as of other classes of men,

few of whom will even pretend to have taken the requisite pains to form a judgment for themselves, or indeed to have that acquaintance with antient history, and other branches of knowledge, which is necessary for the purpose.

They see many men universally celebrated for their genius, as Voltaire, Rauffeau, Hume, and Franklin to be unbelievers; and having, withal, other reasons to be disinclined to the belief of Christianity, they persuade themselves that such men as these could not have become unbelievers without sufficient reason, and therefore think they cannot do wrong to rank with them, and readily join them in their ridicule of religion, and of the Scriptures, of which they have perhaps seen nothing but in the writings of other unbelievers, and especially the passages most open to misrepresentation. It appears to them more reputable to class with men of such superior understandings, rather than with the bulk of mankind, who retain that regard for religion which they received from their ancestors; the generality of religious persons being, it must be acknowledged, of this class. These, therefore, they are apt to hold in contempt and, from the principle of association, the religion which they profess,

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Another source of infidelity is a dislike of religion. Men who are not strictly virtuous, and who know that every violation of the laws of virtue is an offence against religion, will, whether they will confess it or not, or indeed whether they attend to it or not, be impressed with a secret dislike of the subject, and will therefore gladly avail themselves of any excuse for giving no attention to it. This must be the case with all young men who have been addicted to profane swearing, or to that commerce of the sexes which Christianity condemns. And not seeing the immediate bad consequences of those practices, they often will not allow them to be vices, and even find a handle against Christianity for making them to be such.

A dislike to the subject of religion, generated from these and other causes, will operate even to the extinction of all liberal curiosity with respect to it. I cannot in any other way account for that extreme ignorance of the Scriptures which is to be found among many well educated persons in England, and other Christian countries. The bible is not read in genteel schools, or in families; and though it consists of the most antient of all books, and on other accounts would naturally invite the study of the curious, great numbers of persons who have had a liberal education are

unable to give any account of their general contents*.

* The following instance of the extreme ignorance of the Scriptures in a person of whom more knowledge of them might have been expected, may serve both to amuse and to instruct my readers. Being one time in company with Dr. Franklin, and a person now dead, but of considerable genius and a literary turn, brother to an English nobleman now living, being introduced, he turned the conversation upon the subject of the simplicity and beauty of the Oriental style of composition; and to exemplify his observations, he took down his bible and opening it, seemed to read, but really repeated *memoriter*, that chapter which he had himself composed from an old Jewish tradition concerning Abraham. This the gentleman, not doubting but that it was a real chapter in the bible, expressed himself much pleased with. On this the Doctor smiled, and the gentleman perceiving that he had been taken in, was a little mortified. However the Doctor, to try him a little farther, took the bible again, and read the first chapter of the book of Job, which the gentleman also expressed himself much pleased with, but said it was no more a part of the bible than the other. The Doctor then shewed him the bible, and said he might read it himself. But even this did not satisfy him. He said it might be a book of his own printing, and no real bible at all.

The Doctor had before observed to me, that one species of profaneness was now extinct, which was ridiculing the Scriptures; because they were no longer read by such persons as were used to take that liberty with them.

Dr.

Can it then be thought extraordinary, that, prejudiced as they are against religion in general, they should not be believers? They want the necessary elements of Christian faith, viz. a knowledge of the facts on which it is founded, or only such a knowledge as is acquired by hearing them ridiculed. In the same situation, they might have been unbelievers in any other history. They might think the Greek and Roman histories to be incredible, and come to smile at them, as they do at that of the Jews and of Jesus.

Whereas, could they but read the historical parts of the Old and New Testaments with a reasonable share of candour and impartiality, it would be impossible but that their minds must be im-

Dr. Franklin himself acknowledged to me that he had not given so much attention to the evidences of Christianity as the subject required, and desired me to recommend to him a few treatises (but he added of no great length) on the subject; promising to read them with care, and to give me his opinion. Accordingly, I named to him that part of *Dr. Hartley's Observations on Man* which treats of the evidence of revelation, and a work of my own, which he said he would read. But the American war breaking out, and he leaving England presently after this, I do not know whether he ever read them or not. Nor, indeed, do I know that he died an unbeliever.

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pressed with a persuasion of their truth, they bear so many internal marks of it. No person reading the books of Moses, the life of Christ, and the Acts of the apostles, with due attention, and with a sufficient knowledge of antient history and of human nature, can believe such men to be impostors. The opinion they could not but conceive of their excellent characters, for piety, benevolence, and integrity, would repel every idea of the kind, whatever difficulties they might find in reconciling some parts of the narrative with others; difficulties, however, such as we find in all histories written by different persons. And this favourable impression concerning the character of the scripture historians, and the persons whose history they write, would prepare the mind for a serious and candid examination of the external evidence, which would presently appear superior to that of any other history whatever.

But by persons previously disposed to cavil, the most important considerations are frequently overlooked, and therefore it is impossible that they should make a proper impression on their minds. Otherwise, they could not but be sensible that, in rejecting revealed religion, they subjected themselves to much greater difficulties than they could have found in consequence of receiving it, admitting

mitting these to be considerable. If Moses was an impostor, it must, surely, appear extraordinary, that, without the advantage of any splendid talents, as those of an orator, or a warrior, he should impose upon a whole nation, and make them receive a system of religion and laws to which they always shewed the greatest aversion.

But admitting that a man of superior knowledge should arise in a nation so ignorant as the Jews were, he could only have imposed upon them by pretences to *miracles* ; and let them be supposed ever so stupid, and to *reason* ever so ill, they certainly had the external *senses* of other men : And if the nature of the miracles of Moses be considered, it must be evident, that it was out of his power, or that of any man, to impose upon other men so grossly as, if the Jews were imposed upon at all, they must have been, the miracles were upon so large a scale. Let any person only consider the nature, and the magnitude, of the miracles exhibited in Egypt, such as the changing of all the water in the river into blood, or any thing resembling blood, the deaths of the first born, and of the first born only, of man, and of beast too, through the whole extent of the country in one night, the passage of the whole nation through the Red Sea, their hearing the articulate pronunciation

ciation of the ten commandments from Mount Sinai, their being fed with manna forty years, and many others, and he must be sensible that the most stupid of mankind could never have been so grossly imposed upon. With respect to the *books* containing an account of these miracles, there is as much evidence of their being written by Moses, and of their being published while the events were recent, as there is of the genuineness and antiquity of any other writings whatever, whether we consider their internal or external evidence.

If it be supposed that the books were written in any later period, it must be so much the more difficult to account for the nation receiving them as antient and genuine writings, and their submitting to the laws and institutions prescribed in them, during the time of their extreme proneness to idolatry, which certainly continued till the Babylonish captivity; and after this time all attempts to impose upon the nation such books as those of the Old Testament, must have been in vain. Let a similar attempt be made with respect to any other nation in the world, and let the event determine.

Independently of the difficulty of imposing upon any nation in such a manner as the Jews must have been imposed upon, and with respect to facts
notoriously

notoriously true, or notoriously false, there is surely some difficulty in accounting for Moses, or any other Jew, delivering such a system of religion and laws as his books contain, a system so totally different from those of all other neighbouring nations, and so much superior to them, without any superior advantage with respect to genius or education. When all other nations without exception were devoted to the worship of a multiplicity of deities, and practiced the most abominable and cruel rites, how came Moses alone to teach the doctrine of *one God*, the sole creator and governor of all things, and that he was to be worshipped by rites entirely free from all impurity or cruelty? How came the religion of the Hebrews to be the only one in all antiquity that was favourable to purity of morals, and, what is perhaps more extraordinary still, free from the superstitions of divination, magic, and necromancy, to which all antient nations without exception, were addicted. It is an ignorance of nature, or the real causes of events, that is the parent of all this superstition. But how came Moses, and the Jews, to be more knowing in this respect than the Egyptians, the Greeks, or the Romans?

The same and still greater difficulties occur, with respect to Christianity, and the history of its promul-

promulgation, which must be wholly overlooked by unbelievers, and yet compared with them all the difficulties that remain upon the minds of Christians, considerable as they are confessed to be, are as nothing. If Jesus and the Apostles worked no real miracles, how came so many thousands of the nation of the Jews, averse as it is well known they were to their pretensions, to believe that they did; when it was at the hazard of every thing dear to them in life, and even of life itself, that they professed their belief? How were the eyes, the ears, and other senses of those Jews who were cotemporary with Jesus and the Apostles imposed upon; as they must have been if no miracles were really wrought? For this was not a business of reasoning and *argumentation*, with respect to which it is acknowledged that it might not be difficult for one man to impose upon others.

If it be said that the cotemporaries of Jesus, and of the Apostles were not imposed upon, but that the imposition began at a later period, the difficulty will be much increased. Because, whenever the story was told as a thing that took place in *time past*, it must have been well known that no evidence of it existed. If such books as those of the Evangelists and the *Acts of the Apostles* were first published at this day, could it be possible

to make them received as antient and genuine writings, authentic and true histories? And could a single man be found who would risk his liberty, or his life, for his faith in them?

If the writings of the Apostles be spurious, it will not be denied that the epistles of Pliny are genuine, and from them it appears that Christianity was the general belief of the province of Bythinia, and probably of all Asia Minor in his time. And could this have been the case if its origin had not been prior to his time, and indeed as early as the Evangelical history supposes it to have been.

If the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, do not contain, a true history, the Epistles of Paul, Peter, James, and John, must be spurious too. But let any person of common sagacity peruse them, with the least attention, and say whether they bear any marks of forgery, and whether they do not as strictly correspond to the events and circumstances of the times in which those men lived, as the Epistles of Cicero do to the incidents of his life, and consequently whether they be not as great a confirmation of the Gospel history, as his Epistles are of the Roman? There cannot be a doubt but that the writers of those Epistles,

bles, whoever they were, were very different from one another, and from the Author of the Acts of the Apostles. So complex a forgery as this must have been, if it be a forgery, is far beyond the powers of man; and yet the writers discover no marks of superior ability.

But, independently of these difficulties respecting matters of history, how could it have been in the power of a Jewish carpenter, with fishermen for his principal assistants and followers, to impose upon the Jewish nation and the world, as he did. How came such a person as he to form so sublime and just ideas of God and of virtue, and especially to teach the doctrine of a future state with more distinctness and authority than any man who had ever preceded him? And it must be considered that the doctrine of Jesus on this subject was that of the resurrection of the dead at a future period, a doctrine the most improbable in itself, and fundamentally different from the doctrine of the soul surviving the body, on which principle only the heathen philosophers taught a future state. How came this Jewish carpenter, and his followers, to effect such a revolution in the religious system of all the civilized part of the world, as had never been attempted, or thought of, by any man before him?

Are not these difficulties, and many others might be added to them, of a very serious nature? and yet they do not seem to have occurred to the generality of unbelievers. Indeed, they seem not to have had a sufficient knowledge of facts in ancient history to be apprized of them; and the few who have mentioned, or alluded to, any of them do not appear to have considered them with attention, as becomes philosophers, but have contented themselves with giving the most superficial and unsatisfactory answers; ascribing the belief of the miracles above-mentioned to the general *credulity of mankind*. But, in other cases, men do not content themselves with assigning general causes for particular effects. And, credulous as men sometimes are, they cannot be made to believe *any thing*, especially things which they have no predisposition to believe, and by persons to whom they are not previously disposed to give credit. A cause should be assigned for their credulity in every particular case. For every specific effect must have a specific cause; the human mind being subject to as regular laws as any thing else in nature.

In general, I doubt not, the inattention of unbelievers to such considerations as those above-mentioned arises from something in their character,

and habits of life, unfavourable to them ; habits which render them averse to the doctrines of revealed religion, so that they secretly wish they may not be true. But the same effect may be produced from a turn of mind which leads men to look at the dark side of every thing, and to fear, and suspect, that every thing they wish to be true may prove false. In that state of mind, they will always incline to dwell on the objections to revealed religion, rather than on the direct evidence for its truth ; and the consequence of this attention to the one in preference to the other, may be a state of scepticism and incredulity ; and thus some very worthy and well disposed persons may class with unbelievers. But they are comparatively few.

That this is a very possible case, we see with respect to other things. How many persons are there in circumstances in which any stranger would conclude that they must be happy, and have great enjoyment of themselves ? And yet, for want of *attending* to these circumstances, and perpetually dwelling upon things that are unfavourable to them, they are far from being happy. On the contrary, they are continually complaining ; at the same time that the things they complain of appear to all their friends to be very inconsiderable.

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From whatever turn of mind it be that persons are led to give more attention to the objections to revelation than to the evidences for its truth, they will lean to the side of scepticism and infidelity. But, in the eye of reason, and of God, infidelity arising from these very different *causes* will be regarded in a very different light. In some it will be an argument of profligacy, in others of anxiety and timidity.

That the infidelity of Mr. Volney, and probably that of many other persons in France, has arisen from inattention, and gross ignorance, whatever was the cause of it, is evident to every person in the least conversant with antient history. For he supposes that no such person as Jesus Christ ever existed. Whereas, had he been at all acquainted with the history of the times in which Christianity was promulgated, whether written by Christians or others, he could have had no more doubt of the existence of Jesus Christ, whatever he had thought of his miracles, than of that of Julius Cæsar. It is as much in vain to argue with such a person as this, as with a Chinese, or even a Hottentot.

Many unbelievers will say, and I doubt not with truth, that they have read both the scriptures

themselves and the best defences of revelation that have been recommended to them, and yet see no reason to believe in it. To this, nothing can be replied, but that, in the states of mind that I have described, it is impossible for them to give what deserves to be called a *due* attention to any just representation of things. The words in which they are expressed may be heard, or read, but the mind may be so pre-occupied, that it shall be impossible for them to make their proper impression; and the best arguments may be no sooner heard, or read, than they shall be entirely forgotten, or wholly neglected, so that they shall have no more *effect*, than if they had never been presented to the mind at all.

The possibility of wholly overlooking things, even with the eyes open, and the object immediately before them, we see in persons who are searching for particular plants, or other objects, among things of a similar nature. A hundred things may come in view in the course of this search, but not being particularly noticed, the person, who nevertheless *must* have seen them, shall not be able to recollect his having seen them at all. The same is the case with a person who peruses a book with a particular view, or a particular bias, upon his mind. He
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does not see, at least he does not regard, any thing but what he is purposely looking for, and wishes to find; and yet he may not be conscious to himself of any partiality or bias at all. In this case it is hardly possible for the mind to perceive its own delusion, and there seems to be no remedy in the case.

It is, however, every man's interest, and therefore should be his endeavour, to keep his mind as free from prejudice as possible, in order that every truth may meet with no obstruction to its reception with him; and I think the following consideration may, perhaps, be of some use to enable a person to distinguish whether his mind be under any unfavourable prejudice with respect to revealed religion, or not.

Whatever appears advantageous to us, we naturally wish to obtain. Now to a virtuous and well disposed mind, the desire of having his existence continued, that he may see more and more of the admirable system of which he forms a part, and enjoy his being with encreasing advantage, is surely unavoidable, if any thing be so. He will, therefore, naturally wish that Christianity, which alone holds out this glorious prospect to virtuous

men, should be true. It cannot, if it be duly considered, appear to be a matter of indifference to any man, like a mere speculative truth, a proposition in Geometry, or Algebra, in which he has no interest. Also, every person must know whether he has this wish, or not. For, if he duly apprehend the great object, he must have a very earnest wish that Christianity may be true; and if he do give up the belief of it, it will be with sensible regret.

Now it appears to me, that few of the unbelievers that I have ever conversed with have any concern about the matter, or rather they wish that Christianity may not be true. For they rejoice, and triumph, in every seeming refutation of it. I therefore conclude, that they are in such a state of mind as inclines them to wish that it may not be true, probably from suspecting that they should be rather losers than gainers in consequence of it. They therefore prefer even annihilation to the prospect of that future state of retribution which Christianity holds out to them; and from a dislike of the subject, they apply to other studies, and engage in other pursuits, which entirely preclude all attention to this, though in itself certainly the most important, and the most interesting, of all others.

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To a person of a thoughtful and speculative turn of mind, capable of enlarged and extensive views of things, the scriptures present such an idea of the conduct of Providence, as he cannot abandon without peculiar regret. To an unbeliever in Christianity and a future state, the ways of God, if he believe in any God at all, must appear exceedingly dark. He neither knows how things came into being, nor to what they tend, and his own personal interest and importance in the great scheme is as nothing. But revelation opens a great, a glorious, and most animating prospect, and one in which every individual has the greatest personal interest. We are there informed concerning the origin of the human race, of their final destination, and of many particulars of the vast plan of Providence, including the divine missions of Moses and of Christ, the great object of which was to form men to virtue here, and to happiness hereafter.

We also learn in the scriptures, that all the evils of life, the contemplation of which cannot but perplex and distress the serious unbeliever, are only a part of that discipline which is necessary to the great end above-mentioned. We therefore see the hand, the benevolent hand, of God, in

every thing ; and though in a state of trouble and persecution, can *go on our way rejoicing*. In the history of revelation, we see the attention which God has given to men, in affording them light by degrees, and as they were able to bear it ; instructing them more or less from the beginning of the world, giving them more distinct and important lessons by Moses and the prophets, and completing the whole scheme by Christ and the Apostles.

By the light of Revelation we have the pleasing prospect of the gradual improvement of the whole human race, in their progress from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, and from a state of barbarity and perpetual hostility, to a state of universal peace, virtue, and happiness, in which we are assured that this world is to terminate.

Now, what has an unbeliever to contemplate in comparison with these, and other great views, which revelation holds out to us, the contemplation of which tends to elevate and enoble the mind, so as to make a man a superior kind of being to a person who has no knowledge or belief of them ? I cannot help concluding, therefore, that a man who voluntarily shuts his eyes to this prospect,

prospect, must have a strong bias upon his mind, and of a very unworthy kind; and if he does it involuntarily, and with regret, he will not do it without great hesitation, and the most sensible concern.

Let the unbeliever then be ingenuous, and say whether he really *feels* this concern, or not. If he be insensible to the great views I have mentioned, I shall conclude that his mind is in a low and degraded state; and that, whatever else he may know, he is destitute of the very elements of a right judgment in *this* case, and must be left to his own delusions. On the whole, I cannot help concluding with Dr. Hartley, (*Observations on Man*, vol. ii. p. 190) that “ notwithstanding the
“ great prevalence of infidelity, in modern times,
“ it is seldom found to consist with an accurate
“ knowledge of antient history, sacred and profane, and never with an exalted piety and devotion to God.”

If we consider the objections that have been made to revelation by the most celebrated unbelievers, we shall find them to be of such a nature, as to argue no great attention to the subject, or such an examination as historical evidence necessarily

farly requires. By some *prescriptive** arguments, which may be formed in a very short time, they save themselves the trouble of that accurate inquiry into the state of facts which cannot be made without time and patience, but which the discussion of the evidences of revelation absolutely requires.

The great question between believers and unbelievers in revelation, is whether it was possible, consistently with the principles of human nature, as we now find them, and as we must all take it for granted they ever have been, for such numbers of persons as the whole Jewish nation consisted of at their departure from Egypt, and so many thousands of Jews at Jerusalem at the time of the promulgation of Christianity, as were then converted to it, to have believed the miracles recorded in the Scriptures, when they required nothing more than the evidence of the senses, and when they had every motive that men could have to ascertain the truth of the facts, and yet that there

* Tertullian wrote a treatise entitled *De Prescriptione*, in which, without considering the arguments of the Heretics of his time, he endeavoured to prove that they could not be in the right, as their tenets were not held in the churches that were founded by the apostles.

should

should have been no truth in them. This, the believer says, would be a greater miracle than any that the history of revelation supposes. Now this has never been attempted by unbelievers. Nor, indeed, has the case itself been properly noticed by them; having contented themselves with ascribing this great effect, in a random and arbitrary manner, to the credulity of mankind, without endeavouring to shew that, in any similar circumstances, mankind have discovered the same credulity. This will appear if we consider, as I briefly shall do, the general turn of their arguments.

1. Most unbelievers have endeavoured to prove that, without any examination of the particular facts, on which the truth of the Jewish and Christian revelations rest, we may take it for granted, that those religions *cannot* be true; being, as they conceive, in several respects, unworthy of God, and inconsistent with the dictates of natural religion. But what would philosophers say if, upon the publication of any new fact, or appearance in nature, no attention should be paid to the evidence produced in favour of it, but it should be treated as a thing that was impossible, *a priori*, and therefore undeserving of examination? Many phenomena in nature appear at first sight to be
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inconsistent, as those of magnetism and electricity, and many in chemistry, with the law of gravitation, which are not so in reality, and only shew that we have been too hasty in drawing general conclusions, which now require to be modified, the facts in both the cases being unquestionable.

What do we know of nature, or the Author of Nature, but from facts? The first thing, therefore, that is to be done, is to enquire into the truth of the facts; and if the evidence be sufficient to establish *this*, we must leave the question of their consistency, or inconsistency, with other facts to subsequent discussion, however we may be induced by any new appearances to correct the conclusions we may have drawn from preceding ones.

Deductions concerning the moral attributes of God from the works of nature, are by no means so easy, and certain, as from facts in the history of his transactions with men; and there is no process of investigation so familiar to the mind, as that by which we judge of human testimony. How then can we be authorised to say that what is fully ascertained, by indisputable evidence, to have been actually done, or said, by the Divine Being, evidenced by such works as only the Author of
nature

nature could do, is inconsistent with any thing that the mere light of nature teaches us concerning him?

In fact, they who reject revelation on this pretence, first form an idea of the Supreme Being from their own imaginations, and not from the productions of nature, and then conclude that certain things ascribed to him in the scripture history are unworthy of him. But if the history be sufficiently authenticated, the seemingly anomalous parts in the Divine conduct should be treated like similar anomalies in natural appearances, and in the conduct of providence ; leading us only to limit and modify former conclusions, which were before too general. At least, they should not be at once given up as false, but be considered as *difficulties*, on which future observation may throw some light.

But that the moral character of the Divine Being, as deduced from revelation, is, on the whole, taking the great outline of it, free from all reasonable objection, is what no person can deny. Nothing is more clearly inferred from the light of nature, than what we learn in the scriptures concerning the Author of nature, viz. that God is *one*, that he is himself the maker and governor

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of all things, that he is infinitely powerful, wise, and good, that he is a Being of the strictest veracity, that he is merciful to the penitent, that he is a lover of virtue and a hater of vice, and that he will reward the one, and punish the other, if not in this life, yet surely in another. It is impossible to read the scriptures in the most superficial manner, without forming this idea of God; and a thousand doubts concerning the rectitude or the goodness of God will arise from considering the works of nature, for one that can occur to the most prejudiced person to any of the moral attributes of God from the history of revelation.

The general inferences, therefore, above-mentioned, should remain with us (even more than the belief of the goodness of God from the works of nature) whatever we may be able to make of some particular circumstances which seem to be at variance with them. But it appears to me, that all the objections that have been made of this kind, the principal of which relates to the extermination of the Canaanites, are easily and satisfactorily answered. However, the objection to the whole of revelation from an attention to particular objectionable parts, requires no time, or labour of examination, and supposes only the most superficial knowledge.

2. Other

2. Other persons become unbelievers from seeing such doctrines maintained by believers, as they see to be contrary to common sense, and such abuses of other kinds as they find in all the civil establishments of Christianity, and which are highly injurious to civil society ; taking it for granted that such doctrines, and such abuses, are authorised by the Christian religion. They more particularly revolt at the doctrine of *transubstantiation*, held by all Catholics, and that of the *trinity*, by most Protestants, and at the excessive power assumed by the popes, and indeed by priests of most Christian communions. But, surely, in a matter of this moment, every man ought, at least, to take the pains to see with his own eyes, and to judge, by the rules of fair criticism, whether such doctrines be contained in the scriptures, and whether such abuses be authorised by Christ and the Apostles.

It has hitherto been unfortunately maintained by almost all Christians, that the scriptures are divinely inspired ; and this being assumed by unbelievers, every impropriety of sentiment in the writers, and the slightest contradictions in the history, sufficiently authorise them, as they think, to reject the whole. But they should, at least, see whether the writers *pretend* to such inspiration,

tion, which they evidently do not ; or if they did, they might be mistaken with respect to that circumstance, as they give no evidence of it, and the history be in the main as authentic as any other whatever.

In all these cases, a person taking it for granted that revelation *cannot* be true, takes no pains to inform himself concerning the evidence of the facts, which would require much reading, and patient investigation, and consequently much *time*. He does not so much as read the scriptures themselves, or only looks into them in the most superficial manner ; so that, besides knowing nothing of the external evidence, he has no perception of that internal evidence, which could not fail to strike a diligent and impartial reader.

The only unbeliever who appears to me to have had any idea of the true state of the question between believers and unbelievers, is Mr Gibbon. Being acquainted with history, he saw no reason to entertain any doubt with respect to the circumstances in which Christianity is said to have been promulgated in the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, and consequently the rapidity with which it spread through the most distant provinces of the Roman empire. He could not
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deny the remarkable fact, that a few unlearned men, of a despised nation, conceived such ideas respecting the enlightening and reforming of the world, as had never occurred to the greatest philosophers of the most celebrated nations, and that they succeeded in the bold design, having propagated the new religion with unexampled success in the learned and civilized, as well as the unlearned and uncivilized, parts of the world, and this notwithstanding the greatest sufferings to which they and their followers were universally exposed; so that there could not have been wanting any motive to the most rigorous examination of the facts on which it was founded, and while they were all recent. He therefore thought it necessary to give his ideas of the causes of this wonderful event. For he could not but be sensible, that every effect requires an adequate cause. But the lameness of his account betrays the most extreme prejudice, amounting to a total incapacity of forming a right judgment in the case.

Mr Gibbon with great seriousness ascribes the rapid spread of Christianity chiefly to the zeal of its advocates, the strictness of their discipline, and the promises of happiness in another world, which the new religion held out to men. But this is no more than, with the Indian, placing the world upon

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the elephant, without knowing that the elephant was supported by the tortoise. For he gives no account at all of the cause of the great zeal of the primitive Christians, of the strictness of their discipline, or how so many persons were induced to believe these flattering promises of future happiness, so as to live and die in the firm belief of it. Consequently, the great difficulty of the ready reception of the gospel, and the rapid spread of Christianity, without being supported by miracles, remains just as he found it, wholly unaccounted for. The gospel history clearly accounts for every thing that took place. But if that history be false, if no miracles were ever wrought, the *belief* of those miracles, by persons so indisposed to the reception of Christianity as both the Jews and Gentiles of that age evidently were, was absolutely impossible, on any known principles of human nature; consequently, a much greater miracle is in reality admitted by unbelievers, than any that the gospel history supposes, and a miracle without any rational object whatever.

A zealous Christian has no reason to be alarmed at the present prevalence of infidelity. Having no doubt of the truth of his religion, he is confident that it will finally prevail, and by its own evidence, when it comes to be attended to, bear down all opposition.

position. It will be sufficiently evident to all impartial persons, even those who have not the leisure, or the means, of entering into the historical investigation themselves, that the truly intelligent, the inquisitive, the candid, and the virtuous, will be the friends of revelation; and that the firm belief of it tends to form a character superior to that of unbelievers, inspiring a dignity and elevation of mind incompatible with any thing mean or base. The true Christian, having a constant respect to God, a providence, and a future state, feels himself less interested in the things that excite the avarice, the ambition, and other base passions of men, and consequently his mind, elevated by devotion, more easily expands itself into universal benevolence, and all the heroic virtues that are connected with it. The Christian, believing that every thing under the government of God will have a glorious termination, in universal virtue and universal happiness, easily yields himself the willing instrument in the hands of providence, for so great a purpose; and considering himself as *a worker together with God*, he will live a life of habitual devotion, and benevolence; sentiments which are inconsistent with a propensity to a sensual and irregular indulgence.

On the other hand, the generality of unbelievers will appear to be persons to whom the subject of religion is, on some account or other, unpleasant, who, therefore, give but little attention to it, or to its evidence, and therefore, cannot be deemed competent judges of them, whatever be their ability, or knowledge, in other respects. A great proportion of them, it cannot be denied, are also profligate, and licentious in their manners; and seldom or never looking to God, or a providence, they must have their views greatly contracted, and of course shew other symptoms of a little and narrow mind.

Thus Christianity will serve to discriminate the characters of men. It will be cheerfully embraced by the worthiest and the best of men, and it will be the means of making them worthier and better, while it will be rejected by the unworthy, and this rejection, accompanied with a less restrained indulgence of their appetites, and their giving with more eagerness into a variety of worldly pursuits, will tend to debase their character still more. And, from the knowledge that I have of men, it is evident to me that this is the case in fact.

That Christianity should have this two fold effect, is not extraordinary. It is necessarily the case,
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in the wise plan of Providence, with every other means of virtuous improvement. Neither prosperity nor adversity are ever sent in vain, never leaving any man as they found him, but always making him either better, or worse. Prosperity may either make a man more grateful to God, and more benevolent to man; or it may make him proud, insolent, and unfeeling; and adversity may either make him humble and resigned, or fretful, peevish, and malevolent.

The intelligent Christian will likewise see a valuable purpose answered by the present prevalence of infidelity. It is a striking fulfilment of the prophecies of our Saviour, who, though he foretold that his church should never fail, likewise intimated that, at his second coming, he should not find much faith in the earth. It is likewise a confirmation of what the apostles have written concerning the apostacy of the latter days. In the mean time the prevalence of infidelity is the most efficacious means of purifying our religion from the abuses and corruptions which at present debase it, and especially of overturning the civil establishments of Christianity in all Christian countries, whereby the kingdom of Christ has been made a kingdom of this world, having been made subservient to the corrupt policy of men, and in every respect

the reverse of what it originally was. Thus are unbelievers employed by divine providence to reform the Christian Church; and they will do it far more effectually than any of its friends would have done, and this will pave the way for its universal prevalence hereafter. Thus the corruptions and abuses of Christianity produce infidelity, and this infidelity is the means, in the wise order of Providence, of the complete cure of those corruptions and abuses, with only a temporary and partial injury to that religion, of which they are so great an incumbrance.

LETTERS

ADDRESSED TO THE

PHILOSOPHERS AND POLITICIANS

OF

FRANCE.

LETTER I.

GENTLEMEN,

THE representatives of your nation, zealous to distinguish themselves as the patrons of liberty, and the friends of the oppressed and persecuted, in every part of the world, have done me the honour of making me a citizen of France ; and many of your departments, conceiving much too highly of me, and mistaking my talents, did me the farther honour of inviting me to take a seat in your present Conventional Assembly. Though, conscious of my incapacity to discharge the duties of this appointment, and unwilling to abandon a

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a situation of some usefulness in this country, I declined *this* honour, I accepted with gratitude that of *citizenship* for myself, as well as for my son; and, willing to do every thing in my power for the country that has so generously adopted me, I shall run the risk of being less favourably thought of by some of you, by addressing you on a subject which I conceive to be of infinite importance to all mankind, though it appears to be too much overlooked, or grossly misunderstood, by the greatest part of the French nation. You to whom I particularly address these *Letters*, viz. the *Philosophers and Politicians*, will smile, and some of you perhaps will proceed, no farther, when I say that this subject is that of *religion*.

I am well aware that the very term *religion* will give many of you disgust. Nor do I wonder at it, when I consider how much the thing has been abused, and how much the interested and artful have availed themselves of the ignorance and credulity of the rest of the world with respect to it, so that the grossest impositions have long passed for serious truth.

Such, however, you well know to have been the case with respect to philosophy, and especially chemistry, though the age of mystery and deception

tion in this business is now over, and rational and useful science has taken place of solemn pretensions, absurd systems, and idle tricks. But because we now hear no more of the art of *transmuting metals*, or of the *elixir vitæ*, which were the great objects of the chemists of the last age, do we abandon every thing that bears the name of *chemistry*? Neither, then, ought we to discard every thing that bears the name of *religion*, because we have exploded superstition and priestcraft.

The objects of religion are unquestionably of infinite magnitude, compared to which every thing relating to philosophy and chemistry is as nothing. If there be a God, a providence, and a future state, which are the objects of religion, it must be of the greatest consequence to men to be apprized of them. For besides that they are subjects of the greatest sublimity in themselves, and most deserving of our attention and contemplation as rational beings, our knowledge of them is of eminent use to direct our practice, and enable us to secure our greatest happiness.

I am far, however, from being willing to dazzle your minds with a display of the magnitude, and interesting nature, of the objects that I would
recommend

recommend to your attention. Be as much upon your guard against deception as you possibly can. It behoves you to be so, and the more, in proportion to the importance of the subject. But be upon your guard also against deep-rooted prejudices with respect to a subject that you must acknowledge you have not much considered. Take nothing for granted, either from your nurses, from bold atheistical writers, who abound among you, or from myself. But whatever means you apply to detect error, and investigate truth, in other cases, apply them here; and admit nothing for truth but when the reasons in favour of it shall be superior to those against it.

I will even put the matter on this fair issue. I invite you to admit nothing but what shall appear to be least contrary to *natural analogy*, and consequently to *probability*. For I maintain that, as unbelievers in revealed religion, you admit what is more contrary to common experience, and daily observation, than I do. I well know you laugh at the idea of *miracles*; but I say that it will be found, upon inquiry, that you believe in greater miracles than myself. This you must acknowledge to be a fair issue, and upon this I freely put every question between us.

I am, &c.

LETTER

LETTER II.

Of the Being of a God.

GENTLEMEN,

WHEN I say that there is a *God*, I mean that there is an intelligent author of nature, and I maintain that it is most agreeable to natural analogy to admit this. Because marks of *design*, which we universally consider as indications of *mind*, are as conspicuous in the works of *nature*, as in those of *art*.

Would any person, after considering the structure and obvious use of a *telescope*, maintain that it was made without any design, and not intended to give us a distinct view of remote objects; and therefore that it does not prove the existence of a mind in which that design was formed, previous to the construction of the instrument? Can the same person, then, consider the structure of the *eye*, and not say that *it* was a work of design also, its use being exactly similar to that of the *telescope*, and at least as well adapted to answer its end? Are not, also, hands, feet, and every other
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part of the human body, as clearly adapted to answer their several purposes? May not the same observation be made with respect to every part of nature? Is not every thing we see a part of one great whole? Does there not, then, exist a mind capable of comprehending this whole, and a cause that produced the whole? Is it not as absurd to say that the visible universe had no cause without itself, as that a telescope had none?

Whatever difficulty may attend the farther question, *what was the cause of this cause*, thus far we proceed on the clearest grounds, following the most indubitable analogies; and, difficult as it may be to conceive that this great cause of all things exists, and has existed, *uncaused* from all eternity, it is not so difficult as to believe that any thing could begin to be without any cause; since this you cannot but acknowledge to be an absolute impossibility. For if ever there was a time when nothing had existed, nothing could have existed. The actual existence, therefore, of such a world as this, of which we make a part, a world which bears every possible mark of the most exquisite design, is an irrefragable proof that there exists, and has existed from all eternity, a Being possessed of a mind capable of comprehending it, and that must be deemed the proper author of it.

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That we do not *see* this great Being, is no evidence of his non-existence. For as many things do not affect some of our senses, which are the inlets of all our ideas, others may elude them all. Nor is it of any moment whatever in what kind of *substance* the attributes of power and intelligence, which we must ascribe to the author of the visible universe, reside. In fact, we know nothing of any *substance*, having no idea of any thing but what we call *properties*, which as we say, inhere in, or belong to, the several *things*, or *substances*, that we are acquainted with. It is enough for us that there are evident marks of *design* in what we see, to infer the existence of a *designing cause*, whatever that cause be, and whether, with respect to its substance, it be visible or invisible, tangible or intangible, &c. &c. &c.

I am, &c.

LETTER

LETTER III.

Of the Attributes and Providence of God.

GENTLEMEN,

ADMITTING the being of a *God*, or a *principle of intelligence* in the Universe, we must judge of the *designs* of this Being as we would of those of any other, viz. by the character of his works. And the works of nature, I think you cannot but admit with me, are the works of a *benevolent* author; all percipient creatures being formed capable of enjoyments suited to their nature, and furnished with the means of procuring them, and also of avoiding, or mitigating, the evils to which they are necessarily exposed.

The more we see into the œconomy of nature, the more sensible we are that all evil is subservient to good, and, as far as we can judge, inseparable from it; so that, for any thing that appears, the most benevolent Being would not have constituted the universe otherwise than as it is. That we should not be able to see the uses of all particular evils, and should not be able to comprehend the whole
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of so immense a system as that of the universe, cannot appear surprising, when one man is not always able, without particular instruction, to comprehend the works of another man.

It is also most agreeable to analogy to ascribe the whole universe to *one author*, on account of the uniformity that is evident through the whole, and the subserviency of one part to another, immense as this great whole is, and incomprehensible as the great Author of it must be. If it would be unreasonable to suppose that one being formed the head of a man, another the hands, and others the remaining parts of the body, equally unreasonable would it be to suppose that one being formed the earth, another the plants, another the fowls, and others the land and sea animals belonging to it; since they are all intimately related to, and connected with, each other, and in fact are only parts of *one whole*. If we carry our views farther, we shall see the reasonableness of concluding that the earth and the moon, the sun and the planetary system, nay the systems of suns, and every thing comprised in the whole universe, had but one and the same author; since the same law of gravitation, and probably many other laws, connect them all.

Farther

Farther, as no intelligent being does any thing without some view, or design, we must conclude that every thing in nature has its specific and proper uses ; that nothing was formed in vain ; the most inconsiderable article, as it may appear to us, being as essential to the whole as the larger and more prominent parts. And as the laws of nature must be intimately known to the Author of them, he must foresee every thing that can come to pass, and must have planned every thing that comes to pass from the beginning, so that nothing can ever oppose his design. This is what we call the doctrine of an universal and particular *Providence*, or the adaptation of all things, and of all events, to the designs of that great Being who planned, and who presides over, the whole. This is a truth no less clear and indubitable, than it is sublime and confounding to our understandings.

I frequently read the writings of your atheistical philosophers, that I may clearly understand, and enter into, your views and feelings. I wish you would do the same with respect to our writings. In your endeavours to exclude the idea of a designing cause from the universe, I perceive much embarrassment and contradiction, when you would substitute the term *Nature* for that of *God*. You are struck with the manifest wonders of nature,

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and look no farther. I see the same wonders, but they lead me to revere the great Author of nature, that *mind* which comprehends the whole. You see nothing in nature but *effects*. I revere the *cause*. What you ascribe to a blind undesigning principle, something that bears no analogy to what we call *mind*, or *person*, I ascribe to a proper intelligent Being, a Being, whom I consider, and am happy in considering, as ever present with me, and attentive to me, and to all things; who brought me into being for the most benevolent purposes, and who will conduct me through all the stages of it. You see nothing around you but something to gaze at. I look beyond all this, to a Being, or a person, that I can speak to, the object of my gratitude, my attachment, and my confidence.

Acknowledge then, that whatever else you may think of my sentiments, they make me happier than yours can possibly make you; especially when it is added, that, in my ideas, the present life is by no means the whole, nay, but the very infancy of my existence, and that the great Being who made me, and who has placed me in a school of discipline here, will not leave me in the grave, but produce me again in circumstances much more favourable than the present.

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Here, I am sensible, you will smile again; but attend to what I shall observe on this subject in my next Letters.

I am, &c.

LETTER IV.

Of the Evidence of the Miracles performed in Attestation of the Jewish and Christian Religion.

GENTLEMEN,

ADMITTING the being of a God, and his constant Providence, you ask me what evidence I have of a *future state*. I answer (and I beg you will not revolt at my language, but have the patience to hear me out) the express declaration of God himself, that he will raise men from the dead at a future period, and that he will then render unto them according to their works; and you cannot doubt the power of the Author of nature to do this.

If you ask me the evidence of this, which I know you will think a strange assertion, I answer,
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that this has been declared by men who were commissioned by God for the purpose, and who proved their mission from him by such works as God only, the Author of nature, could perform, viz. real *miracles*, an evidence and the only evidence, of a power that could controul the laws of nature.

Again, the proof that such miracles have been wrought, is such *testimony* as cannot be denied without admitting still greater miracles, viz. that numbers of persons the best qualified to judge of them, and who had no motive to impose upon others, attest their reality. Since, to suppose that all those persons were either deceived themselves, or concurred in a scheme to impose upon others, would be more evidently contrary to the known course of nature respecting mankind (who, we must take it for granted, have been the same in all ages) than the reality of the miracles which they attest; this, when all the circumstances of the case are attentively considered, being a more manifest violation of the established laws of nature, than the other, and for no rational end.

For example, that the whole nation of the Jews, consisting at that time of six hundred thousand men, besides women and children, should believe

that, after seeing many miracles performed in Egypt, they all walked through the Red Sea, while the waters divided to make them way; that they all heard the distinct articulate pronunciation of the ten commandments from Mount Sinai; that after continuing in the wilderness forty years, during which they were witnesses of several other miracles, they all went through the river Jordan as they had through the Red Sea; that they should observe the Passover, and other annual customs, in commemoration of those events, and preserve among them to this day books containing a distinct narrative of these events, universally, and at all times, believed to be written at the time while the events were recent, are facts of this nature.

Jews are *men*, and they were by no means previously disposed to believe any thing of the kind above mentioned, or to practise the religious rites enjoined upon them in consequence of them. And therefore that their minds should be universally impressed with this belief, without a sufficient cause, in the reality of the events, would be a proper miracle, nay a complication of miracles, of the most extraordinary nature. And what makes the case more extraordinary still, it would be a series of miracles wrought for no end; whereas the
miracles

miracles recorded in the books of Moses had a great and worthy object, viz. to impress the minds of the Jewish nation, and through them those of other nations, with the firm belief of the supremacy of one true God, the maker of all things, and of his providence in conducting the affairs of men.

Also, the miracles performed by Christ, the great object of whose mission was the revelation of a future state of rewards and punishments, are less extraordinary, and less contrary to the common course of nature, than the firm belief of so many thousands of persons, (previously disposed as they all were) that such miracles were wrought; when they had every opportunity, and every motive, that men could have to satisfy themselves concerning their truth, on the supposition that no such miracles were wrought. And the reality of their belief cannot be questioned, since they sacrificed every thing that men hold dear to them in life, and many of them life itself, to their belief.

The miracle, for so I must call it, of so many persons deceiving themselves and others, could not have been calculated for any other purpose than that of *mere delusion*, without any rational object whatever. Whereas the miracles on which the

belief of Christianity is established had the greatest and most glorious object that can be conceived, viz. the giving mankind a just idea of their future destination, shewing them that this life is but the infancy of their being, and that they are to be educated for an immortal life hereafter. The full persuasion of these great truths gives an unspeakable dignity to the human character; it adds greatly to the true enjoyment of this life, and in a manner annihilates all its pains and troubles, as well as tends to prepare them for their future state.

This was an object worthy of the author of the human race, and could not have been accomplished by any other than supernatural means; no appearances in nature giving us any rational ground to expect that we shall survive the grave. Nothing, however, could be better calculated to produce this belief than such miracles as Christ wrought, and himself, the great preacher of the doctrine, dying in order to exemplify in his own person, that resurrection which he was authorised to promise to all. Had the most incredulous of mankind been asked, what evidence of a future life would satisfy them, they could not have demanded any thing more than this; nor, as I have distinctly shewn in my *Discourse on the Resurrection of Jesus*, could they have demanded any stronger

stronger evidence of any fact, than that which divine Providence has actually provided for *this*; so that its credibility should be stronger, especially in remote ages, and to the end of time.

You may be disposed to arraign the conduct of Providence in not superseding the use of miracles, by such a general plan of things as should render them unnecessary for the moral instruction and improvement of man. But, besides that it might be sufficient in reply to this to say, that it is not our business to dictate to the Author of nature, we may easily perceive that if an attention, on the part of man to the Author of nature be of any use to us, as it evidently is, this end is much better gained by occasional deviations from the laws of nature than by a rigorous adherence to them.

Such is the constitution of human nature, (which we must take for granted is the best,) that things of constant occurrence, and perfectly regular in their appearance, do not easily excite particular attention. Who of the bulk of mankind asks the reason why the sun rises, why plants produce their proper seeds, or seeds their respective plants? But unusual appearances excite universal attention, and we cannot be satisfied without knowing *why* they happen. It is

very possible for a nation of men to pass their whole lives in the view of all the wonders of nature, without ever inquiring after the Author of nature. But let their attention be excited by prodigies or miracles, and they will be led to reflect upon the subject, and thus come to revere God in all his works, those of common providence, as well as those of an extraordinary nature; and thus a respect for Him and his laws may possess their minds, and influence their conduct. And no person is authoris'd to say that this great end can be equally answered without miracles, or occasional deviations from the regular laws of nature.

I am, &c.

LETTER

LETTER V.

Cautions against superficial Reasoning on this Subject.

GENTLEMEN,

IT is not my intention in these *Letters* to enter into a detail of the evidences of revealed religion. This I have done, in a great measure in other publications; but only to give you what I apprehend many of you have not at present, viz. some idea of the *importance* of the subject, and the *nature* of the evidence, in order to induce you to make farther inquiries concerning it; and I wish you to do this with the diligence and rigour that the case requires.

Be persuaded, then, to examine with due care and impartiality the evidence of the facts on which revealed religion is founded, as you would do with respect to any other interesting facts of the same historical nature. It is acknowledged that the facts recorded in the books of scripture are not analogous to any that now fall under our observation, and that, therefore, they require a proportionably stronger evidence. But then you will find the
evidence

evidence to *be* proportionably stronger than that for ordinary facts; no other facts recorded in history being nearly so well attested. Circumstanced as the primitive Christians were, we cannot doubt but that both they, and their enemies felt themselves deeply interested in ascertaining the truth with respect to them. In consequence of this situation, we may be well assured that no other facts whatever underwent a thousandth part of the scrutiny that, from the nature of the case, these *must* have done; and while they were *recent*, so that the examination was the most easy. Both the *persecuted* and the *persecutors* would do every thing that their opposite interests could suggest to prove, or to disprove, the miracles appealed to. And we see that after a contest of three centuries, when Christianity had all the powers of the world, and all the learning of it too, to contend with, it prevailed, and established itself. What could this be owing to but the power of truth? for it had no other advantages whatever.

Do not content yourselves with saying, that
“ mankind have always been the dupes of im-
“ position, so that there is no occasion to trouble
“ yourselves with enquiring by what means they
“ were imposed upon in this, or any other parti-
“ cular case.”

Credulity

Credulity is an affection of the human mind that well deserves to be considered by philosophers. Like other *effects*, this must have a fixed *cause*. And the only reason why men become disposed to believe without much inquiry, is an idea, acquired by themselves, or received from others for whose opinion they have a respect, that strict enquiry was not necessary; the thing to which their assent is demanded being so analogous to other undoubted events, that a slight evidence is sufficient. This, however, supposes that the credibility of some events to which these are analogous was originally well established. Consequently, the too easy belief of extraordinary events affords a pretty strong presumption, that, though not the events in question, yet that others similar to them, were well authenticated.

If we see any person, by his knowledge of philosophy, chemistry, sleight of hand, or any other means, do things that astonish us, we give the closest attention to the facts, and do not admit them at first without very particular evidence. But having seen them, or been by any other means fully satisfied of their reality, we do not think it necessary to make the same strict examination of similar facts, reported to be performed by the same person, by those in connexion with him,
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or by similar means. They are then considered as common events, being agreeable to a new analogy of things.

The readiness, therefore, with which the reports of miracles said to be wrought by your saints in the dark ages, in which there is reason to suspect gross mistake, or imposition, will afford a philosopher an argument for believing that, in some preceding age, real miracles had been wrought, and that the credit of them had been well established. For such would be the necessary effect of the reality of the miracles of Christ and of the Apostles. These being admitted, the credulity of the Christian world with respect to subsequent miracles followed of course, but not upon any other supposition.

In a similar manner I account for your incredulity with respect to all miracles. You have given no attention to the evidence of the original and well authenticated miracles, but only to that of the subsequent and fabulous ones; and seeing reason to disbelieve *these*, you have been led by a false analogy to suspect *all*. But without considering the present state of things, you should place yourselves in the situation of a philosopher at the time of the promulgation of Christianity, and examine

amine the circumstances of the original miracles, the credit of which procured the too easy belief of the fabulous legends, at which you so justly revolt.

Many unbelievers, viewing things very superficially, think to satisfy themselves and others with saying, that *antient traditions* are never to be depended upon; that there were Egyptian and Grecian fables, as well as Jewish and Christian ones, but that now men of sense pay no regard to any of them.

But they do not attend to the obvious and important distinction between *tradition* and *history*, between opinions taken up a long time after a supposed event, and written records of transactions coeval with them; and this is precisely the difference between the fabulous histories of Egypt and Greece, and the Mosaic and Christian histories. For it is as certain that the books of Moses were written and published to the whole of the Hebrew nation in his life-time, and the history of the Evangelists and the Acts of the Apostles in the age in which the transactions were recent, as that the histories of Thucydides and Tacitus were written and published in the same circumstances; because the people among whom they were published equally received them as genuine, and thereby gave their testimony

testimony to the general truth of their contents. And at no period of time would it have been more easy to procure them the reception they obtained in the one case, than in the other.

As human nature was the same at all times that it is at present, we may form a judgment of the difficulty of imposing upon any nation, or people, such histories as those of the scriptures by a supposition respecting ourselves. Let any person then endeavour to persuade the people of this country, that their ancestors, in some remote period, passed from Calais to Dover, by walking through the sea, which divided to make them way, and let him produce *books* containing a circumstantial account of the event, as written at the time. Would he be able to procure any credit to the narrative? He would certainly be laughed at for his pains. In fact, it would be no less difficult for him to do this, than to divide the sea, as he had related. He would find the one to be as really impossible, as much contrary to the established course of nature, as the other.

In like manner, let any person produce books similar to those of the New Testament, and see if he can gain such general credit to them, as to induce thousands of all descriptions of men to under-

go the greatest hardships, and to lay down their lives, for their faith in them, even in circumstances far more favourable to his purpose than those in which the Evangelists wrote. He would find it as easy to raise the dead, as to effect any such a thing.

It requires only a due attention to *facts*, such as no person who has any faith in history can deny, and to the well known principles of *human nature*, to perceive this. But few unbelievers in revelation have been disposed to pay this due attention to either; and in consequence of this they really believe things more extraordinary in their nature, and therefore more truly *incredible*, than the Jew or the Christian.

Study, then, with particular attention the history of the times in which Christianity was promulgated. The narrative is as circumstantial, and as open to inquiry, as that of Cæsar and Pompey, or that of any other period of antiquity; and you will find indubitable facts, and innumerable of them, absolutely inconsistent with your hasty and random hypothesis.

You will find men of all descriptions, and of all nations, many of them as cool and sensible as yourselves,

selves, and who had as much at stake, with respect to character, or fortune, as you can have ; men who had every means of informing themselves on the subject, and who evidently spared no pains in doing so ; so impressed with the persuasion of the reality of the great events on which the truth of Christianity is founded, that they persisted through life in giving the fullest evidence of their conviction.

And it is particularly to be observed, that this was not a persuasion concerning *metaphysical opinions*, of which few persons are competent judges, but things that were the objects of the senses ; such as the instant cure of disorders well known to be the most incurable, raising the dead to life, and other works equally miraculous and stupendous, in which there could be no suspicion of fallacy, and of which all persons are equally judges.

But some of your writers have given so little attention to this subject, though it is an historical one, that they have denied the very existence of Jesus Christ, have asserted that the very term *Christ* was borrowed from some Eastern language, having the same origin with *Christnou*, one of the gods of Hindostan, and that Christianity is only
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a particular modification of the worship of the sun.

Serious as the subject is, it is not possible to forbear smiling at such palpable ignorance. I shall expect that the same writers will soon attempt to allegorize the history of Julius Cæsar, and maintain that no such person ever existed. For there is not a hundredth part of the evidence for the existence of Julius Cæsar, that there is for that of Jesus Christ. Hereafter the history of France itself may be allegorized; the very names of *Lewis*, *Dumourier*, and *Pethion*, may be derived from antient languages, and the present war of your republic against the despots of Europe, may be said to mean nothing more than the war of the elements of nature.

If I had not seen so much of the power of prejudice, I should wonder that so many men, of unquestionable good sense among you, and even able writers, should have given so little attention as they have done to *natural probability*, in judging concerning an historical subject.

The letter of Pliny the younger is well known to all the learned, and its genuineness was never called in question; and yet one would think that

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some of your writers against Christianity had never heard of it. He wrote about A. D. 106, between seventy and eighty years after the death of Christ. In it he asks advice of the emperor Trajan how to act with respect to the Christians who were brought before him; and, speaking of the progress that the new religion had made in his province, Bythinia, he says, “Many of every rank, and of both sexes, are accused, and will be accused; nor has the contagion of this superstition seized cities only, but lesser towns also, and the open country. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it may be restrained, and corrected. It is certain that the temples, which were almost forsaken, begin to be more frequented, and the sacred solemnities, after a long intermission, are revived. Victims are every where bought up, where for some time there were few purchasers.”

Could Christianity have made this amazing progress in so short time, without force, and against every possible mode of opposition, if there had been no such person as Jesus Christ, or if there had been no truth in the evangelical history?—Bythinia was not very far from Judea, where it originated; and as both countries were within the same empire, there could not have been wanting
any

any opportunity of making inquiry into the truth of the facts. And it is remarkable, that the nearer we approach Jerusalem, as at Antioch in Syria, where the imposture, if there had been any, must have been more evident, the more Christians we find. That this should have been the case without there being such a person as Jesus Christ, or any truth even in the miraculous part of his history, would be more extraordinary than any thing that is related by the evangelists; the admission of whose account of things makes all the rest perfectly easy and natural.

Mr. Lequinio, a later writer than Mr. Volney, does not deny the existence of Jesus Christ, but what he says of him is more improbable than even *this*. He represents him as the wisest and best man that ever lived, which he certainly was; “one
“ who was actuated by the most sincere good-will
“ to all the human race, teaching the great prin-
“ ciples of moral equality, and the purest patriot-
“ ism; braving all dangers, opposing the great,
“ despising alike glory and fortune, equally tem-
“ perate with respect to himself, beneficent to
“ others, and sympathizing with all; hated by
“ the powerful, whom he provoked; persecuted
“ by the intriguing, whose artifices he exposed;
“ and put to death by a blind and deceived mul-

“titude, for whom he had always lived. This
“generous philanthropist,” he says, “who wholly
“sacrificed himself to the public good, who gave
“his whole existence to the unhappy, and even
“to his persecutors, never lived but to teach vir-
“tue.—*Prejugés détruits*, p. 286.

Was ever a character in romance more unlike any thing in nature than this? And yet this was an ordinary Jewish carpenter, who had no advantage of education or knowledge of the world. This man, Mr. Lequinio supposes, without any thing supernatural about him, to have acquired this most extraordinary super-human disposition, a generosity and magnanimity exceeding that of all the heroes and philosophers of antiquity, to have converted thousands of his countrymen to the belief not only of his being a prophet, or a man inspired of God, but even *the Messiah*, whom before this they had universally expected as a king and a conqueror, and that, after dying in the most public manner, they were satisfied he rose from the dead, as he declared beforehand he should do, in confirmation of his divine mission.

If a person of so excellent a moral character could be a mere impostor; if a man with so few natural advantages could deceive so many of his
country-

countrymen, all previously disposed to reject his claim, and enable them to deceive so many more, of all nations, we must say that nature, neither before nor since that time, ever produced such men, either to deceive or be deceived. It is not, however, a little extraordinary, that Mr. Lequinio should express this high admiration of a man who directed his whole life, and finally died to establish that very *prejudice* which he himself is labouring to destroy. He certainly did not judge of the feelings of Jesus Christ by his own.

As the evidences of revealed religion are of an historical nature, let me advise you, in a more especial manner, to read with the greatest attention the historical books of scripture, and see whether they bear any marks of forgery. If your minds be truly unprejudiced, you will be satisfied that no books were ever written with so much ingenuoufness, or that have so many internal marks of truth. But do not expect that, with regard to composition, and accuracy in other things, they should be without faults. Consider the manners, opinions, and prejudices of the times in which they were written, and make due allowance for them. A tincture of these is an argument of their genuineness. For all that is pretended by well informed Christians is, that the books that are

usually termed *sacred*, were written by pious and honest men, well acquainted with the facts which they relate, but that they reason about them in such a manner as it was natural that persons in their circumstances would do. The different writers also, like all other genuine original historians, relate facts with the same variations, with respect to order, and less important circumstances, when they agree in every thing of real consequence.

Consider also that no writer is properly responsible but for what he relates as of his own knowledge, or the events, and transactions, of his own times. The history of Moses, for example, properly commences with the Exodus. The whole of the book of Genesis must have been collected from tradition, and the account that Moses has given of the *creation* was such as appeared to him, and other persons of his age, to be well founded. He no where says that he was divinely inspired in what he wrote on that subject.

That the books of scripture were written by particular divine inspiration, is a thing to which the writers themselves made no pretensions. It is a notion destitute of all proof, and that has done great injury to the evidence of Christianity; as also have other absurd opinions, and various
superstitious

superstitious practices, adopted by Christians of later ages, though from the influence of the circumstances in which they were.

In my *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, you will find an account of all, or the principal, of those opinions and practices, and of the causes which gave rise to them. I beg your attentive perusal of that work, as well as of my *History of the Christian Church to the Fall of the Western Empire*. You will there, I flatter myself, see a natural account of the rise and progress, as I hope you will, in due time, also see the termination, of those monstrous corruptions of Christianity which justly shock you so much, and which have indisposed so many persons of good sense to all inquiry into the subject.

I mean particularly such doctrines as those of the trinity, transubstantiation, vicarious suffering, and eternal torments; and, above all, the usurpation of all power temporal and spiritual by the popes, and other ecclesiastical persons, with the horrid cruelties committed by some Christians upon others on account of religion; and that most unnatural union of civil and ecclesiastical authority in all the civil establishments of Christianity in this country, as well as lately with you, from which

circumstance alone religion has been enabled to do so much mischief in the world.

These, and many other absurd doctrines and practices, I disclaim as much as you can do. They are far from being countenanced in the scriptures, though, from gross mistake, and from motives of interest and ambition, they have been represented as essential parts of Christianity. You have been taught from your earliest years to consider them in this light; and hence, when you come to reflect, your rejection of the whole system, as manifestly absurd, but without taking pains to examine whether the things at which you revolted were really parts of Christianity, or not. You may also have been insensibly influenced in your rejection of Christianity by a prejudice, natural to men of sense, against whatever is commonly received by the vulgar.

A real philosopher, however, will endeavour to divest his mind of *this*, as well as of every other *prejudice*, and to see things as they really *are*. And I flatter myself, that when your infidelity, which has been produced by the civil establishment of a corrupted Christianity, shall have contributed to the overthrow of that system, that which is genuine will meet with a candid hearing, and a
cordial

cordial reception among you. True religion, not enjoined or salaried by the state, but the choice of the individual, you will find a valuable support of public virtue and public spirit; and a great security to your liberty. On this account, among others, I shall rejoice if, by any means, you can be induced to give to this important subject the attention which it deserves, and I shall then have double pleasure in subscribing myself

Your fellow-citizen,

J. PRIESTLEY.

LETTER V.

GENTLEMEN,

IN the preceding *Letters* I have addressed you as *philosophers* and as *men*, interested in the discovery of important truth, and acquainted with the methods of investigating it. If I were to address you as *politicians* on the subject of *religion*, it would be in the language of the French merchants to your famous Colbert, when he asked them what the government could do in
favour

favour of trade, *laissez nous faire, let us alone*. It is business with which, as statesmen, you have nothing at all to do, and in which you can never interfere with any advantage either to *religion*, or the *state*.

Naturally, there can be no more connection between *religion*, and *civil government*, than between *philosophy*, *medicine*, or any other branch of knowledge, and civil government; the objects of both being essentially different. The proper object of civil government is the security of men's persons and property, which requires the union of force; but it has no respect to any thing beyond the present life. Whereas religion consists of peculiar doctrines and practices, which relate to men, personally and not collectively, considered, with respect to which no union of force can be of any advantage to them; and the great object of it is the happiness of men, not as members of society, but as individuals, and in a future state, to which the power of civil governors does not extend.

With much more reason might the state interfere in directing what *medicines* should be administered to the members of the state, and who should administer them; because it might be said, that
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the strength of the state depends upon the health and vigour of the citizens. But whatever be men's opinions concerning a future state, and the means of preparing for it, or whether they have any belief in a future state or not, care may be taken by good laws, and a wise administration of them, to prevent their injuring one another in this life.

As far as religion comes in aid of good morals, it can only be by giving men an idea of its being their duty, from a regard to God, and a future state, to behave well, and to befriend their neighbours. But this depends upon the sincerity of their belief in religion, which no power of the state can enforce. Temporal punishments, or worldly emoluments, which are all that civil government can hold out to men, cannot make them *believers*. It can only make them *hypocrites*. And therefore there are more conscientious men among sectaries, who are not favoured, but frowned upon by the state, than among the members of establishments. Are not the Protestants among you at least as good members of society as the Catholics, many of them only nominally so; though the former, besides bearing the whole expence of their own religion, contribute their share to that of the state? It is time that they be relieved, if not indemnified

dennified, for this extraordinary expence. The same may be said of the Dissenters in England.

To suppose that Christianity cannot support itself without the aid of civil government, is the greatest reflection upon it, and contradicted by the clearest facts in history. Not only did this religion establish itself in the world without the aid of civil power, but during three centuries, while all the civil powers in the world were hostile to it. And after Christianity had considerable countenance from the Roman emperors, the salaries of Christian ministers arose from the voluntary contributions of the laity, and there was no such thing as *tythe*, or any thing in the form of a *tax*, for its support, for more than a thousand years after the Christian æra.

Nay, the wealth of the church, without the aid of the state, grew exorbitant, and often required to be checked. This more than sufficient provision for the clergy, from the superstition of ignorant ages, occasioned such a redundance in that order of men, that all Christian countries soon groaned under the burden; and an independent subsistence, secured to them by private donations, and the laws of the state, took from them all restraint upon their conduct; so that in many countries

tries they became vicious and abandoned in the extreme, a great cause of the corruption, not of the reformation, of morals.

In this state of things, religion being a mere trade, its doctrines, from causes that I have elsewhere explained, exceedingly absurd, and the practices enjoined by it a miserable superstition, men of good sense and little inquiry, and especially those who were disposed to be licentious, easily became unbelievers. This has been remarkably the case with you, and begins to be so with us. But as all evils, in the course of divine providence, tend to cure themselves, this infidelity, which has been produced by civil establishments of religion, will I doubt not, be the means of overturning them; and then *rational Christianity*, without any aid from the state, will recommend itself to all thinking and serious men, and the world will be *re-christianized*.

I shall not trouble you, or myself, with the recital of all the evils that have arisen from civil establishments of Christianity. Almost the whole of the long catalogue of the complaints of philosophers and politicians against religion, have had no other source than this. All religious *persecution*, and the hatred of one sect to another, has been
owing

owing to exclusive privileges granted to some sects. In North America, where there is no civil establishment of any form of Christianity, the members of all Christian societies, however discordant, live upon the best terms with one another, and the state is at no expence on account of any of them.

With us the case is widely different, and the consequences are sufficiently apparent. We, who are dissenters from the establishment, all lie under civil disadvantages, and many of us are not even tolerated by law. In these circumstances every attempt to obtain any relief from our burdens, nay all our endeavours, by means of the press, to enlighten the minds of our countrymen on the subject of religion, and especially on the evil of establishments, excites the greatest hatred and animosity against us. This is perfectly natural with men interested in the continuance of the abuses by which they subsist.

What a glorious example would you set the Christian world, if you could relieve civil government of all concern about religion, and leave men to provide for it as they should think proper themselves. No person who has a real value for his religion could complain of this. On the contrary,
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he would think his religion disgraced by any support from the state. If the zeal of its friends will not provide for its support, it ought to fall. The Protestants among you have not suffered their religion to fail for want of sufficient funds; and do the Catholics think less highly of their religion, or have they less zeal for it than the Protestants have shewn for theirs? I believe not.

I do not mean, in these *Letters*, to do any thing more than to suggest a few hints to lead your thoughts to the subject of *religion*, and its relation to the state, so as to make it appear as worthy as I conceive it to be of your most serious attention. In several of my publications I have considered it much more at large. If you wish to know which of them I would more particularly recommend to your notice, I would take the liberty to mention my *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, my *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, and my *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, including that on the *Resurrection of Jesus*, besides the *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, the *History of the Christian Church to the Fall of the Western Empire*, and the *History of early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ*, noticed before. These relate to the subject of religion in general, and the evidence of it. The
subject

subject of *civil establishments of Christianity*, I have considered in my *Essay on the first Principles of Civil Government*, in my *Letters to Mr. Burke*, and my *Familiar Letters to the Inhabitants of Birmingham*.

With my earnest wishes for your prosperity, and especially for the speedy and happy settlement of your civil constitution; trusting that it will be favourable to your best interests, by leading to *virtue* and *happiness* (with respect to which I cannot help considering *religion* as of the most eminent use) and with sincere gratitude for the honour you have conferred upon me; while in my native country, which I have faithfully endeavoured to serve, I have found neither protection nor redress, I am

Your fellow-citizen,

Clapton, Jan. 21, 1793, }
Of the French Republic 2. }

J. PRIESTLEY.

THE END.



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